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**Civil society empowerment in third  
countries: are culture actors providing  
powerful voices in support of  
democratisation processes?**

**by Yudhishtir Raj Isar**

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The EENC was set up in 2010 at the initiative of Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission (DG EAC), with the aim of contributing to the improvement of policy development in Europe. It provides advice and support to DG EAC in the analysis of cultural policies and their implications at national, regional and European levels. The EENC involves 17 independent experts and is coordinated by Interarts and Culture Action Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> A cultural analyst, educator and public speaker, Yudhishtir Raj Isar is Professor of Cultural Policy Studies at The American University of Paris and Eminent Research Visitor at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. His paper has been prepared on behalf of the European Expert Network on Culture (EENC), a group of experts that provides advice to the European Commission in the field of cultural policy. The EENC is coordinated by Interarts and Culture Action Europe.

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## Context

By tabling the issue of civil society empowerment for democratisation, the EC is innovating significantly towards its goal of attaining a 'new and more pro-active cultural role for Europe in the context of Europe's international relations'.<sup>2</sup> As civil society empowerment for democratisation and human rights is increasingly placed at the heart of human development, it is high time that the potential of cultural expression to inform, inspire, and energize widely shared civic aspirations to democracy is vigorously fostered. Beyond the European Union, artists and cultural organisations have long worked, often in conditions of great difficulty, at this interface. European cultural actors have long sought to cooperate with them in these efforts. Today, a new page has been turned. The 'Arab Spring' and many other civic mobilizations in the global South have not just electrified European public opinion. They have also and perhaps above all transformed the nature of our trans-national connections and obligations. The present force of civic action has the potential to renew completely the meaning of notions such 'Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation' or of 'culture and human rights in the EU's external policies'. It has opened a window of opportunity for all Europeans to help take the reform process much further and for the European cultural sector to earn its own 'democratic dividend'. But to seize this opportunity we must be interculturally informed in our goals, realistic in our expectations and pragmatic in our methods. We must be ready to tackle visions of and engagements with the ideas and ideals of democracy that differ from our own. We need to demonstrate the creativity of imagination that we claim for ourselves. We also need to be adequately supported by the policies and institutions of the Union. Some of the many complex challenges we face are set out below, together with some of the key questions we need to address.

## Challenges

Most if not all of today's European polities recognize that artistic and cultural expression are constitutive of a free, democratic society – of its diversity, of its liberties, of its openness and of its flexibility. In the living memory of many Europeans as well, the arts have also been vehicles of dissent or rebellion in once totalitarian societies. Our cultural actors – artists as well as arts-producing or arts delivering organisations and networks – have generated ideas, art works, art forms, projects and spaces that have supported and enriched our engagement with democratic governance, fundamental rights and the like. In our societies, the artist can be 'someone whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations'.<sup>3</sup> We thus rightly consider the arts and culture to be crucial components of the 'infrastructure' of values and aspirations that underpin the energies of civil society.

In non-European settings such understandings also exist. They have emerged more recently perhaps and many are still fragile. The autonomous voice of civil society is still work in progress in many instances and we know that it can be and has been manipulated by political forces at several levels. Yet clearly also, cultural practitioners now figure amongst the citizen actors who are acting independently to bring about changes to their lives. Their actions range from Anna Hazare's recent fast to bring about stronger anti-corruption laws in India, the service delivery protests of poor people in South Africa, the mass uprisings of people in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria to overthrow dictatorial regimes, or the huge protests against rising prices and the cost of living in Israel. Within the cultural domain itself, there are also struggles under way, for example in favour of ethnic pluralism and minority rights, which go hand in hand with the democratic ethos.

While these are the broad patterns, many local variations exist, each reflecting historical legacies, cultural specificities and different social value systems. For the ideas of democracy and human rights

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world*, COM(2007) 242 final.

<sup>3</sup> This admirable formulation is from Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York, Vintage, 1996.

themselves are part of a certain political 'culture', premised on specific values and understandings. Europeans seeking to 'support' democratic movements in other settings need to be sensitive to different understandings and priorities, or even to a potential clash of perspectives. No 'one size fits all' solution can be remotely envisaged: democracy and human rights are certainly universal values, but there is no global formula for their application on the ground. Europeans need to be lucidly self-reflexive about the self-proclaimed mission of spreading the democratic message, lest it resemble Europe's 'civilizing mission' of yesteryear.

The whole point of democracy and democratic discourse is to address such issues openly in the public sphere, to offer constructive critique, to formulate alternatives and to include the excluded – the multitude who are still kept at the margins of political participation and public debate.<sup>4</sup>

Given such generic conditions, the question for the *European Culture Forum* is how the EU and European cultural operators can best work at the operational level, in a true spirit of intercultural partnership and mutual learning, with their counterparts in third countries to further 'transitional and democratic processes'. The challenges here are concrete. It is difficult to debate them in the abstract. To be sure, many success (and failure) stories exist, but few are well documented and besides, citing individual cases would exceed the page limit of this paper. But in order to root our arguments in at least partial reality, we shall cite two pioneering initiatives that have already benefited from European support – *Arterial Network* in Africa (AN) and the Egyptian Coalition of Independent Cultural Institutions (CICC). Both initiatives are germane to the operational challenges the sector faces.<sup>5</sup>

✦ *Increased direct support*

More resources need to be channelled directly into the hands of third country cultural practitioners themselves. Even small amounts can go a long way, thanks to the volunteering characteristic of the sector. A frequent risk, however, is the over-provision of support to a 'happy few' of individuals and organisations who have learned how to 'talk the talk' and flatter the self-regard of otherwise well-intentioned 'donors'. Support needs to be as multifaceted and broadly based as the pluralism it professes to nourish. Also, it is important to refrain from setting priorities, envisaging strategies or supervising their implementation on behalf of local actors themselves. Many well intentioned attempts may end up primarily benefiting outsiders, including commercial and political interests, academics, or the funders themselves, ironically reinforcing old modes of paternalism and dependency. Often, the best that an outside partner can do is to find ways to encourage cultural activists and their organisations to carry on their own work for their own purposes and on their own terms. The most enabling approaches stay out of the way, leaving cultural projects the social space and the time they need to be effective.

✦ *Organisational and other forms of support*

Revolutions can be triggered by a single spark, 'but they can only be sustained and help effectively to transform societies through organisation', observes AN's Mike van Graan. His organisation links artists, cultural activists, creative enterprises, cultural NGOs, etc. at national, regional and continental levels so as to forge a coherent voice for the sector, to provide it space to practice democracy by actively participating in forming organisations, electing leadership and holding them accountable, and having a coordinating/ed structure that solicits opinions and formulates collective positions that it then represents on behalf of the sector to national governments and in relevant international forums. Another challenge facing cultural activists is to form and strengthen informal networks and formal associations at the local, national, and international levels that can enable them to support one another. European cultural organisations could draw creatively upon their own experience to contribute to such partnership-building processes. The notion of partnership pertains equally to working cross-sectorally, a challenge set out in paragraph 4 of Article 151 of the Amsterdam Treaty

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4 Formulations borrowed from Charles D. Kleymeyer's pioneering book *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development*, Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner, 1994.

5 The author is greatly indebted to the playwright Mike van Graan, Secretary-General of AN, and Basma El-Husseiny, Managing Director of Culture Resource (*Al Mawred Al Thaqafy*) a pan-Arab non-profit organization for the information, insights and formulations they have generously shared.

that has been taken to heart by European institutions and cultural actors alike.<sup>6</sup> In other regions too, recent events have shown how effectively artists and intellectuals can use cultural expression to engage with key questions of democratization, equity or human rights. There is growing awareness everywhere of how a cultural perspective can inform, inspire and energize the efforts of civil society in addressing broader economic, social and political issues. Yet even in Europe the goal of linking cultural policy with other policy domains has been achieved only partially. Could European cultural actors share the lessons of their own successes and failures with their counterparts in third countries, and in ways that are relevant to the transformations unfolding before our eyes?

✦ *Provision of information and research*

Citizens are disempowered when they are misinformed or under-informed or do not have the critical perspectives and tools to evaluate the information they are provided with. Thus AN – through monthly newsletters, regular news alerts, website updates, etc. – seeks to empower activists within Africa with information, with cultural policy tools, with research that will allow them to engage in effective advocacy campaigns at national and regional levels. Such ‘clearinghouse’ functions can promote improved networking among cultural action groups, counteracting geographic and socio-cultural isolation. Often, the simple awareness that a similar organisation exists elsewhere gives a group heart and the renewed energy to face its own challenges. Networking can also facilitate cultural exchanges and the transfer of skills.

✦ *Monitoring freedom of expression*

Key to creativity is the human right to freedom of expression. While this is advocated in many international and national policy documents, in practice, this right is often compromised with artists being arrested, having their works banned, denied access to public funds and opportunities, being intimidated by political and religious forces, etc. Even in countries such as India, ‘the world’s largest democracy’, non-State actors, driven by politicized religion, actively subvert the rule of law by harassing or intimidating, often violently painters, playwrights and film-makers and thus restricting their freedom of creation. Precisely for this reason, AN is establishing ‘Artwatch Africa’, a project that seeks to map the state of freedom of expression in every African country and will subsequently report and expose cases where this right is contravened. European actors can give international resonance to the politics of naming and shaming that is involved.

✦ *Supporting advocacy campaigns*

Democracy is about citizens taking ownership of their lives and interests and engaging in activities to secure such interests. AN encourages artists to identify particular issues, such as freedom of expression or artists’ rights that need to be campaigned for. For example, the Ugandan government has decided to demolish the Ugandan Museum in favour of a multi-storey office block; AN has helped to expose this project and engender international support for the Museum. Alliance-building is needed for advocacy purposes as well, since the cultural sector cannot bring about social change on its own and many actors now argue that it definitely needs to collaborate with, and be part of broader struggles. AN is doing so Africa-wide and CICC is pursuing this goal within Egypt, as it articulates all the demands of the current people’s movement for political and social reforms and pledges itself to transform the conditions of cultural work ‘in a manner commensurate with the spirit of change brought along by the revolution.’ European cultural actors could therefore envisage effective ways of relaying these efforts and bringing them to the attention of their own governments and Europe-wide institutions.

✦ *Encouraging ‘voice’*

Artists need to have the freedom to express their views and be encouraged to do so as both AN and CICC now actively advocate for. AN has initiated competitions in playwriting, filmmaking (with cellphones) and poetry to encourage artists to find their individual and collective voices that reflect the contexts in which they work, and to bring their insights to bear through their creative work that will

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<sup>6</sup> ‘The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures.’

then be distributed on the continent and internationally. European arts organisations could help give them international exposure

In a nutshell, in addressing these challenges, it behoves us as cultural practitioners to heed the following pertinent words of a leading international political theorist:

Imagination is the key to diversity, to civic compassion, and to commonality. It is the faculty by which we stretch ourselves to include others, expand the compass of our interests to discover common ground, and overcome the limits of our parochial selves to become fit subjects to live in a cosmopolitan spirit in a global world.<sup>7</sup>

### **Key Questions**

#### *✦ Funding*

In a difficult financial environment, how can we work to secure more financial resources towards democracy-building cultural expression in third countries?

#### *✦ Organisation*

What are the most effective ways in which our networks and organisations strengthen the organisational infrastructures of third country cultural actors engaged in democracy-building work?

#### *✦ Partnership*

How can we ensure that our attempts to bolster democracy-building through culture are based on a spirit of true partnership, sharing of experience and mutual learning?

#### *✦ Anticipating the risk implications*

This field is a mine-field of political 'hot potatoes' for all stakeholders. How best to anticipate the risks and head off the threats?

#### *✦ Disseminating knowledge*

What channels and messages can we use to ensure that the voices of cultural actors in third countries be heard and heeded?

#### *✦ Cross-sector alliances*

What lessons from the European experience in building alliances between the cultural and other sectors can we share with third country actors for the benefit of democracy-building?

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Barber, 'Serving Democracy by Serving the Arts and the Humanities', essay prepared in 1997 for the (US) President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.